RIVER VIEW

Once Again, the Hudson Is at a Turning Point

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TARRYTOWN

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Susan Stava for The New York Times

SHARP EYE John Lipscomb patrols the Hudson for Riverkeeper, an environmental-watchdog group

THE east bank of the Hudson River where Tarrytown meets Sleepy Hollow offers a snapshot of the riverfront's modern history.

There, separated by a new condominium development, are remnants of the riverfront's early- and mid-20th century industrialization: the site of a former General Motors plant, where the environmental cleanup is so extensive that the developer chosen to build housing, office and retail space recently pulled out, and a former asphalt plant, whose tarlike byproduct used to bubble up in the Hudson itself.

Set back a bit is an apartment building for low-income tenants that opened in 1966, a time when people of means shunned proximity to a river fouled by sewage, fuel and garbage.

Outshining them all are promises of the riverfront's future: the condominiums — two new

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high-end residential complexes (one still under construction) — that are among the 17,000 waterfront units planned on both sides, from Yonkers to Albany, according to Scenic Hudson, a Poughkeepsie-based environmental group.

The Hudson may be at its cleanest and most desirable since federal clean-water laws were enacted nearly 40 years ago, state officials and environmentalists said, but its future health is still uncertain.

The river, its environment and its inhabitants are threatened by aging sewage- and storm-water treatment systems built in the 1970s to meet that era's environmental standards, by unprecedented development and by global issues like climate change, state officials and environmentalists agree.

Though developers today have the ability — and a mandate from state and community officials — to make new construction more ecofriendly than ever, developing the waterfront poses inherent environmental risks, said Wendy Rosenbach, a State Department of Environmental Conservation spokeswoman.

Building along the riverfront, where the surface naturally absorbs water, increases the risk of flooding, which forces untreated sewage and storm water into the river, she said. Increased development also threatens natural ecosystems like wetlands, which means that habitats can be destroyed, Ms. Rosenbach said.

So the quandary for government officials, environmentalists and builders is how to remedy past abuses of the river while forging ahead with plans to create a waterfront that are economically feasible yet environmentally friendly.

"We and the developers view the water as an asset," said Chuck Lesnick, the City Council president in Yonkers, where the challenges include evaluating the environmental impacts of major developments proposed for its waterfront. "You don't want to kill the asset. You want to enhance it."

Still, there is no quick fix for sustaining the Hudson as a sustainable ecosystem and a major economic and recreational attraction, state officials said.

"While significant progress has been made, there are still real issues," said William C. Janeway, the Department of Environmental Conservation's regional director for the Lower Hudson Valley and Catskills region, whose job includes protecting the river's health.

The most recent indication of that, officials and environmentalists said, is a report released in May by Riverkeeper, a Tarrytown-based environmental-watchdog group, claiming that 10 of the Hudson's 13 key fish species have declined since tracking began in the 1980s.

Soon after that report was issued, Gov. David A. Patterson announced plans to restore the population of fish, including the American shad, that once drove a thriving fishing industry.

The number of licensed commercial Hudson fishermen, which peaked at about 1,000 in the early 1900s, has dwindled to about 30, including just four who pursue shad seriously, said John Mylod, a former executive director of Clearwater, a Poughkeepsie-based environmental group.

There is a moratorium on catching Atlantic sturgeon, whose population was so robust in the Hudson Valley around the turn of the 20th century that it was called "Albany beef."

Alex Matthiessen, Riverkeeper's president, attributed the fish decline largely to five power plants along the Hudson, including the Indian Point nuclear plant. Riverkeeper has long contended that the plants have not adopted technology to reduce the number of fish killed, though studies conducted by the power plant operators show that the fish populations are healthy.

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